Evaluation of the Oklahoma State Park System

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Research Team

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Project Overview

- Phase 1 – Inventory of outdoor recreation resources and GIS mapping
- Phase 2 – Statewide recreation needs assessment
- Phase 3 – Benchmarking the state park system
- Phase 4 – Reporting
- Extension – Carrying capacity of dune parks
Phase 1 – Inventory and Mapping

- Geographic Information Systems
- Map Layers
  - Political boundaries
  - Highways
  - Bodies of water
  - Land ownership
Overview of Oklahoma

Legend
- Golf Courses
- RV Parks and Campgrounds
- Army Corp of Engineer Points
- Army Corp of Engineers Areas
- State Park Areas
- Fish and Wildlife
- National Park Areas
- Department of Defense Areas
- Forest Service
Phase 2 – Needs Assessment

- Telephone survey – 2,013 completed calls
- On-line survey – 651 respondents
- Focus groups – 8 held statewide
  - Oklahoma City, Tulsa, Woodward, Miami, Weatherford, Lawton, Beavers Bend, Tahlequah
- State Park visitor study – 3,414 respondents
- State Park managers’ study – 350 staff respondents
General Conclusions

- Oklahoma population is better educated and more diverse than are actual state park visitors
  - Racial, ethnic differences exist among park visitors
- 50% of Oklahomans report having visited a state park in past 12 months
  - Confused as to which properties are state parks
- Large majority of park visitors are day users
- Park visitors ‘self-select’ preferred parks
- State parks are a ‘public trust’
General Conclusions

- Primary purpose of state parks: provide inexpensive outdoor recreation opportunities
  - Differing views among campers, cabin guests, and lodge guests
  - Differing views among general population and park visitors
- Strong views on economic value of parks
  - Unwilling to pay more taxes
  - Perception that parks, lodges, golf course are profitable
  - Great value to local economies
Phase 3 – Benchmarking

- Plan – determine what to benchmark
  - 8 performance measures
- Plan – identify benchmarking partners
  - 6 state park systems
- Do – data collection
- Check – data analysis
- Improve - implementation
Identify Benchmarking Partners

- Similar versus dissimilar partners
- Mutual assistance (both partners must benefit)
- What is ‘best in class’?
- Who is ‘best in class’ on specific measures?
- Who do we want to be like?
Benchmarking Partners

- Similar to Oklahoma State Parks
- Indiana, Georgia

- Dissimilar from Oklahoma State Parks
- Arkansas, Missouri, Colorado, North Carolina

Defining factors: 40 measures of operations
Operating budget, capital budget, personnel, funding sources, acreage, types of property, amenities
NOT agency of management or mission statement
General Conclusions

- **Financial support**
  - Oklahoma lowest on capital expenditure
  - 3rd highest in operating budget
  - Used fewer funding vehicles for revenue
  - 3rd highest in total visitor revenue

- **Concessionaires**
  - 4 systems dominated by state owned facilities, Oklahoma and Arkansas differed from that
  - 4 systems annually evaluate quality
General Conclusions

- Marketing and public information
  - Marketing materials, Web pages
  - Only Georgia and Arkansas reported marketing plans
  - Oklahoma conducted fewer customer surveys
  - Oklahoma had fewest park interpretive staff

- Maintenance
  - Oklahoma 5\textsuperscript{th} in acreage, 3\textsuperscript{rd} in average budget per acre
  - Four partners applied national standards
  - Partners spend greater percentage on upkeep
General Conclusions

Planning
- Only Oklahoma did NOT have master plan
- Partners have business plans, capital improvement plans, staffing plans, and interpretive plans for EACH property

Public Involvement/Constituent Understanding
- Similar patterns among all partners
- Three systems, including Oklahoma, have non-profit foundations
General Conclusions

- **Staffing and Personnel**
  - Fewer interpreters than all but North Carolina
  - 2nd highest number of employees (behind Georgia)
  - High ratio of visitors to staff

- **Stewardship**
  - OK only system without ROS, LAC, VERP, and carrying capacity models
  - Varied from partners on factors in development (Politics #1)
Recommendations: Philosophy

- Establish and publicize the meaning of Oklahoma State Parks
- Manage that system utilizing a Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS)
- Develop a green plan for operations
Recommendations: Assess Needs

- Agency and staff awareness of constituents
- Formalize public input related to planning and operations
Recommendations: Program Plan

- Plan for amenities fitting intent in each park
- Develop and implement a park-preparedness process and plan
- Establish and implement a maintenance plan applying professional standards
- Develop a resource management plan for each property
- Thorough review of existing policies and procedures
- Require concessionaires to comply with performance objectives and quality standards
Recommendations: Pre-program

- Refine marketing efforts – target specific groups and types of users
- Initiate a dedicated funding source – vehicle license surcharge
- Increase capital investment to rehabilitate and repair existing infrastructure
- Reconsider the role of interpretation and education
- Develop a compelling message for the public
Recommendations: Personnel

- Establish and implement a professional development school for staff
Extension of Project

- Carrying capacity at Little Sahara and Beaver Dunes
- Utilizing the Visitor Experience and Resource Protection (VERP) model
- By August 2005